

VZCZCXRO2788
RR RUEHDBU
DE RUEHYE #1711 3461321
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 121321Z DEC 06
FM AMEMBASSY YEREVAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4562
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT 0015

C O N F I D E N T I A L YEREVAN 001711

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/12/2016

TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM AM

SUBJECT: NK WAR VETERAN ARRESTED FOR SEDITION, FACES
DEPORTATION TO LEBANON

Classified By: CDA Anthony Godfrey for reasons 1.4 (b & d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) On December 10, Armenian authorities detained Nagorno-Karabakh war hero Zhirair Sefilian on charges of plotting to overthrow the government by force. The Armenian National Security Service (NSS) arrested Sefilian and alleged co-conspirator Vardan Malkhasian while the offices and apartments of 20 to 30 alleged members of the unregistered public organization "Defense of the Liberated Territories" were searched. Sefilian has been a vocal opponent of the GOAM's negotiation strategy with Azerbaijan to return territories held by ethnic Armenian forces in exchange for some codification of the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. A leading member of Sefilian's group told the press that the former commander of the Shushi battalion faces deportation to his native Lebanon. Our view has been that Sefilian's group is more likely a bunch of populist crackpots than a threat to Armenian statehood, but we would have little sympathy for an armed group threatening to overthrow the government. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) According to an NSS statement, Sefilian and his group had planned to disrupt the upcoming elections and to depose the current Armenian authorities through an armed rebellion. The NSS further announced that Sefilian and his associates had been funded by "dubious sources" that were aimed at instigating clashes between the opposition and the authorities while pushing the opposition to commit "illegal acts." The NSS statement concluded by adding that Sefilian and Malkhasian had been found in possession of illegal guns.

¶3. (C) Sefilian, who had applied unsuccessfully for Armenian citizenship several times, gained notoriety in July 2006 when he openly denied there was a conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, claiming that the issue had been settled "long ago." He further criticized the GOAM for using the "hard-fought (occupied) territories" as bargaining chips with which to secure a settlement with Azerbaijan over NK's future.

¶4. (C) Armen Aghayan, a leading member of Sefilian's group, told the press that Sefilian faces deportation on charges of plotting to overthrow the government and rejected the charges as false. ARF Dashnakstsutyun MP Gegham Manukian, the head of Yerkir TV, reported to us that the office searches and the arrest itself had been "civilized." Manukian also said that although to him the underlying reasons for the arrests are still unclear, most probably GOAM authorities had serious grounds to initiate their investigation. Manukian said that according to his sources, calls for the forceful overthrow of

the regime had actually been made, and suggested that GOAM authorities will likely use this situation to extradite Sefilian from Armenia. Mikhel Danielian, a representative of the Helsinki Association, one of the most influential local human rights groups, expressed the same opinion and stressed that Sefilian most probably had the potential to implement his plan. Danielian agreed that the GOAM authorities probably had definitive cause to detain Sefilian and his associate.

¶5. (C) The Lebanese Ambassador told us December 12 that while he had received no formal notification from the GOAM that they planned to deport Sefilian, he was well aware of the case. As it turns out, Sefilian's wife works as a local-hire secretary in the Lebanese Embassy. She phoned her Ambassador

SIPDIS
on the evening of December 11 to profess her husband's innocence and to complain that the arrest was carried out by a group of 15 masked NSS troopers in a public restaurant. She said that the NSS fully intended to deport her husband, but that it was unclear when the act would take place. The Lebanese Ambassador said that Sefilian's arrest had made the international news and had sparked protests in front of Armenian Embassies abroad.

GODFREY